

LETTER

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FROM A

Gentleman in EDINBURGH to a Friend at LONDON,



With RELATION to the

PROPOSALS for Establishing by Law an equal and certain Fund, for Maintenance and Support of the Begging Poor and Out-pensioners of the City of *Edinburgh*.

SIR,

IN the Days of our early Friendship, I have often heard you regret the incredible Loss sustained by the Publick, where regular Provision was not made for supporting and employing the numerous Poor that will always be found in large Societies. Your Humanity led you to pity the Wants of those truly indigent, and still more to lament the unhappy Fate of Orphans, and Infant Beggars, left exposed to Idleness and Vice, Nurseries of the biggest Mischief, teeming not only with the future Ruin of these neglected miserable Objects, but fruitful of many pernicious Evils to the Community, when omitting to interpose by a well-timed Charity, and wholesome Regulations for preventing Idleness, and punishing the Insolence of vagrant and sturdy Beggars.

Your Reflections went further, you used sometimes to remark, That the wiser Nations of Antiquity had certainly made proper Regulations upon this Head, and that of the most extensive and universal Kind, for you could no otherways account for hearing so little, in the *Greek* and *Roman* Stories, of their populous Cities being pestered with Common Beggars. But, be in that what will, you used often to say, That a regular Provision for the Maintenance and Employment of the Begging Poor, was a Subject that merited the Attention of the Legislature. Your Observation upon the Practice of foreign Countries will enable you to judge what Scheme is most likely to obtain that End: Your Attachment to the real Interest of the Metropolis of this Country will make you attentive to every Proposal for regulating its Police; and your Seat, in an honourable House, makes it proper to lay before you a genuine Account of the Conduct of the Magistrates and Council of *Edinburgh*, in order to obtain a regular Provision for the Maintenance and Employment of the numerous Poor, intitled to Support from the Inhabitants within the City and Liberties. I therefore send you inclosed a true Copy of the Proposals, transmitted to our Representative in Parliament a few Days ago; and persuade myself, if the Scheme appear just and reasonable, you will use your Interest in carrying it through, and removing any Prejudices that may be raised against it, by such as either misapprehend the Design, or don't wish well to the Project, I mean, amongst our own Citizens; for I hardly suppose, if great Pains had not been taken to raise Prejudices at home, which may create or foment a publick Opposition, that any Umbrage could be taken (by those who have the Honour to represent their Country in Parliament) at a Project that seems founded upon the most equal Principles, of which you will be the better able to judge, after hearing the History of this Scheme, with a few Remarks upon a Pamphlet, entitled, *Alarm to the Householders and Heretors of the City of Edinburgh*, published about two Days ago, a Copy of which I have also inclosed.

The Council have for some Years been turning their Thoughts upon devising some proper Scheme for maintaining and employing the Poor: That which appeared most unexceptionable was an annual Rate to be levied upon the Inhabitants, in Proportion to the valued Rent of their Houses; every other Project carried with it such an apparent Inequality, that they were soon laid aside. The Method hitherto practised, by voluntary Collections at the Church-doors, has not only greatly fallen to Decay, since the Objects of Compassion were removed out of Sight, by being lodged, maintained and employed in the large Charity Workhouse erected here some Years ago, but many never contributed any thing that Way. Those who used to frequent nonjuring Meetings, do now resort to no Place of publick Worship; and some others by no Means contributed in Proportion to their Circumstances. Thus the whole Burden fell upon a Part of the Inhabitants, while great Numbers totally exempted themselves; Was it not therefore just, in order to come at a proper Scheme, to lay aside the Collections at the Church-doors, and give the Preference to a Method less precarious, and obviously much more equal? Can it then be supposed, that in a Question, whether an equal or unequal Scheme ought to be followed, that any Person would prefer the last, but such as wanted to exempt themselves from that Charity which ought not only to be the Choice, but infallibly is the Duty of every well regulated Human, not to say Christian Society.

When the Scheme was tolerably adjusted it was drawn out in the Form of Proposals, Copies of which were lodged with the Lord President, and Committee of the Lords for regulating the Police of the Town, the Barons of Exchequer, the Dean and Faculty of Advocates, the Keeper and Writers to the Signet, and afterwards the whole Lords of Session had written Copies put in their Hands, by Members of the Council appointed to wait on them, and expressly signify the Council's Intention to apply to Parliament this Session. After mature Deliberation, their Lordships, satisfied that the Scheme was for the Publick Interest, with great Unanimity signified their Approbation, after some useful Improvements, suggested by the Lords, had been made upon it; this gave rise to the transmitting the Scheme to *London* along with a Petition, as the Time limited for presenting private Bills to Parliament was within a few Days of expiring.

This, Sir, is the true History of these Proposals; whence you will easily judge, if the Writer of the Alarm had just Cause to complain, that the Matter was kept in the Dark. It was communicated to some of the largest Societies in Town; several of the Lords had Copies of it, before the last *Christmas* Vacation; this Gentleman owns he was indulged with a Sight of it in *September* or *October* last; and is there any Wonder, that he was desired not to take a Copy of the first rough Draught then extant, and long before it was digested or turned into its present Form? Neither can he deny that he had several Meetings with the then Magistrates, who listened to every plausible Objection, and were far from declining any useful Hint thrown out by him or any other Person. How he came to imagine that the Project was to be dropt, or the Plan altered, I do not know, having never heard of any such Thing till it appeared in the printed Alarm, which, by the Way, I think, I may venture to say, was not communicated to a single Member of Council; so you may judge whether this Work, calculated to alarm the Inhabitants, has not more the Air of a Project to surprize them into an Opposition, than the Conduct of the Council to conceal what they were doing, when their Proposals were lodged in the Hands of so many different Persons, and a Variety of Copies wrote out by the Servants in the Town Clerk's Office, who never would have been entrusted to do so, had the Magistrates intended to keep a Secret what they wished all the World acquainted with, altho' they did not chuse to print their Proposals, when lying in Writing before Societies of the highest Respect, that might make very useful Improvements upon them: Or why does the Alarm Writer say,

say, that the Town Council, or *a Party in it*, surprized him with a sudden Application to Parliament? The Proposals were publickly read in Council, and were unanimously approved by the whole Body. Where then is the Justice of talking of *a Party*? Every Thing done was open and above Board.

But says the *Alarm*, "A more pernicious Project could not be hatched for this Town and Neighbourhood—That, if it goes through, it will ruin the Town altogether.—That there is no real Necessity for it.—That, if there was, it could be established in another Way of less Expence, and easier to be redressed; and that it will by no Means answer the supposed Intention."

Whether this is intended to convince or alarm, will best appear by shortly examining the Reasons. The first is, That there is no Necessity for any such Bill, because such Deficiencies, as hitherto have happened, have been abundantly supplied by voluntary Contributions. But, alas! is not this one of the Evils sought to be remedied? Is not that Method both precarious and unequal? Did not the Bulk of what arose from voluntary Contributions, come out of the Pockets of those who constantly used to give their Collections at the Church Doors? So that the old Defect still remained, *viz.* That such who were abundantly able, but unwilling, had still the Power totally to exempt themselves from any Share of a Burden that ought to fall equally upon the Inhabitants of the Community, in Proportion to their Circumstances.

2d^o, It is said there is no Necessity for any such Bill or Aid from Parliament, because, by Act 12th, 1686, the Lords of Session, with Consent of the Magistrates, have Power to impose the Tax proposed, and that they exercised that Power by an Act of Sederunt in the 1687, as also in the Year 1731—But by casting your Eye upon that Act of Parliament, you will easily find, that both the Rubrick and Statutory Part concern the Cleansing of the Streets, and any Mention that is made of Beggars in the Preamble, and Recommendation at the Close of the Statute, seems rather to concern those who repaired to the City of Edinburgh from distant Places, than such Poor as were truly entitled to the City's Publick Charity. The Act of Sederunt did indeed empower the Magistrates to impose a Stent for three Years, for cleansing the Town, and freeing the same of Beggars, which plainly imports the banishing of those who had no Title to the Publick Charity, especially as the Act provides, that the Magistrates shall be holden to perform whatever Regulations the Lords shall make for cleaning of the said Town of Edinburgh, &c. "without craving any further Imposition or Expences than what is hereby granted." You may easily judge then, if the Lords considered this as a standing Act, authorising a Tax for the Support of the Ordinary Poor. What part in the Year 1731 was by no Means upon the Plan of this ancient Act of Parliament, but a voluntary Agreement of the College of Justice, to subject themselves for three Years to the Payment of a small Duty, in Proportion to the Rent of their Houses, from which otherways they were exempted by Law. Whence it is easy to perceive, that the above Act of Parliament, and what proceeded upon it, can by no Means, render the present Application unnecessary. And yet the *Alarm* would have it, that the present Magistrates have no Reason to go to Parliament with their Proposals, "unless it be either to make a *Job for some body*, on Pretence of soliciting for the Act sought, or out of Hopes to get the Parliament to do what they cannot expect, to satisfy the Lords of Session, on fair Representation and Hearing, is either just or necessary;" and concludes with an Insinuation that the Projectors, as he call them, probably *pay themselves for their Trouble*, as well as indemnify themselves of the Expence out of the Community's Money. Upon this I do not chuse to trouble you with my Observations; the good Humour of the Insinuation is abundantly apparent; but I believe it would puzzle the Writer himself to explain what is meant by these Words, *making a Job for some body*. The City Member is entrusted with laying the Petition before the Parliament, and using his Interest for procuring an Act for the salutary Purposes proposed, and neither he, nor any other using their good Offices, can expect any Reward but what results from the Consciousness of having acted from a disinterested Regard to the Publick Good. The Thing itself seems incompatible with being made a Job of, and those concerned for its Success unsusceptible of such mean Views, as I hope every candid Inhabitant will be of entertaining such groundless Suspicion; and sure none, who ever had the Honour to be Members of Council, can suppose it possible for the Authors of this Scheme to turn it any way to their private Interest: And for saving Expence by procuring an Act of Parliament, explaining or extending the Power of the Lords of Session, and then debating before them concerning the Application of that Power, seems too chimerical a saving Scheme to merit Examination.

The third Argument against the Bill is drawn from the Houses in Town already being subjected to the Land-Tax, the Annuity for the Ministers Stipends, and an annual Rate for Window-Lights; which, says he, makes about 19 per Cent. of the Rent of his House; and then he conjectures his Share of the Poor's Rate would make 10 or 12 per Cent. more; whence he concludes, that many of the Inhabitants would leave the Town, to save 30 per Cent. of the Rent, "unless the Landlords with in the Town abated so much of their Rents, merely on the Article of Interest." But alas, is not this, to careless Readers, loading the present Scheme, as it were, with the whole of this 30 per Cent. as it is called? Could the Retiring to the Suburbs save any of the Inhabitants a Fraction more than their Proportion of the Poor's Rate? For sure that is the only additional Burden to be brought upon them, in lieu of which they get free of the weekly Collections, which, to the Generality of those attending the Church, and endowed with any Compassion for the Poor, could not fail to come higher for themselves and Families, than their Proportion of the Sum now applied for, suppose it was to be levied to the full Extent; not to mention the Chances of its being gradually diminished by the Profits arising from the Labours and Industry of the Poor in the Charity Work-house, which, in Time, may become considerable. Or can it be imagined, that Men of Busines would leave the Town for a mere Trifle? or that, in a Pet, the late Frequenters of Nonjuring Meetings would, in a Body, make their Retreat, because put on the same Footing with the rest of the Inhabitants? You, Sir, know the Situation of Edinburgh, and therefore can never be led to imagine, that a Person of the least Trade or Industry would live in the Suburbs, from whence the Access is every-where so difficult to the Scene of Busines, purely to avoid the annual Payment of about Twenty or Twenty-four Shillings, for their Possession of a House at the Rent of 20*l. per annum*, and so in Proportion for a higher or lower Rent; for this is the Quota that at present would fall to the Share of a House at 20*l.* Rent. And could such Trifles be supposed to influence the Inhabitants to leave the Town, would not many, ere this Time, have resorted to the Suburbs, where Houses, equally commodious, are lett for near one half of the Rent they pay in Town?

These, Sir, and these only, are the Arguments against the Necessity or Usefulness of the Bill in general; and 'tis frankly submitted to the Judgment of every Man of Candour, whether they be sufficient for refusing to commit the Bill, or if they, by any means, support the Idea of impending Ruin to the City of Edinburgh, in case what still appears to me an useful and salutary Measure should be followed? But whatever Alarm high sounding Words may give to a Landlord or Tenant unskilled in these Matters, I am sure they can make no Impression on those who are divested of Prejudices, and endowed with Abilities to weigh the Arguments, as well as Candour to pass an impartial Judgment.

But this leads to the Examination of the Objections contained in the *Alarm* to the Bill itself, supposing it to merit the Consideration of a Committee; or that the Authority of the Legislature was necessary for establishing a certain and equal Fund for the Relief of the Poor. And in this view it is objected,

1st, That no such Rate or Tax ought to be imposed on, or levied from, the Inhabitants or Householders within the Royalty, unless the Suburbs be also comprehended or included under the Act, seeing, without this, they would have no proper Equivalent for the Tax; for as often as Amusement or Busines led them to the Suburbs, they would be attacked with Shoals of Beggars.

This, Sir, has a specious Appearance, but no more; most of the Poor in the neighbouring Parishes reside in and about the Suburbs. The Houses there are generally of little Value and low-rented. The Quota to be raised from them, in Proportion to what will fall to the Share of the Inhabitants within the Royalty, supposing the Act to pass on the present Plan, would come to a mere Trifle, noway sufficient to maintain perhaps a fifth or sixth Part of the Poor residing in the Suburbs. To make the Houses in the Suburbs pay a larger Proportion than they can bear, would be a real Hardship; and to compel the City to take in their Poor, in Consideration of a Sum noway sufficient for their Maintenance, would be no less a Grievance, and bringing a Burden upon the Town, that the proposed Tax could by no means support. On the other hand, the fair and equal Method, would be to subject the whole of the four neighbouring Parishes, in the Manner suggested by the Proposals from the Council; then, indeed, every Parish, agreeably to Law, would bear the Burden of their own Poor, and the Scheme rendered compleat. The Suburbs and Neighbourhood of the City would be kept as quiet and easy, and quickly feel the Advantages enjoyed by the Inhabitants within the Royalty, who, for some time, have been freed from the Clamour and Nuisance of the Begging Poor: But to follow the Plan of the Objector, would be bringing an intolerable Burden upon the City and Suburbs, to the almost total Relief of the neighbouring Parishes, without any just Equivalent. But if the present Plan is followed, there can be no doubt, but a little Time will make the neighbouring Parishes discover their true Interest, and incline them to apply for having the whole of their Poor admitted to the Charity

Charity Work-house, upon just and equal Terms, for the adjusting and accomplishing of which there are special Provisions contained in the Proposals made by the Council.

2dly, It is objected, That in place of giving Authority for levying a Sum not exceeding 1800*l.* a year, to be ascertained by the Method mentioned in the Proposals, it would be better to lay on, and levy an annual Rate, not exceeding so much *per Cent.* which the *Alarm* gives out to be more consonant to the Practice of the Legislature in such Cases.

As to which, Sir, you are a much better Judge than I am; but so far as I have had occasion to look into the Poor's Rates in *England*, the Churchwardens and Overseers have an unlimited Power both to fix the annual Rate and Method of levying it. It was objected, That so excessive a Power might sometimes be misapplied; to obviate which, upon an exact Calculation, no more was sought by the Council of this City, but what appeared absolutely necessary. But as Time, and the Industry of the Poor usefully employed, might greatly lessen the annual Expence, it was proposed, that a Committee of those best able to judge, should yearly make up the Estimate, subject to the Controul of another Committee, whose Rank and Station put them beyond the Suspicion of having any partial Views; and this was thought the more likely Method to prevent all Murmuring, and, if established by the Legislature, can't fail giving absolute Security, that every thing will be conducted with the utmost Accuracy and Candour; and yet the *Alarm* treats it, as if a Sum not exceeding 1800*l.* might, for ought that appears, or is set forth in the Bill, be deemed equal to the full Rent of all the Houses in *Edinburgh*; that if Power for levying it was granted, "it would be statuting, contrary to all Reason, that those whom certain Persons should deem to be Poor, and take into a certain House, should be provided competently, at their Discretion, out of his Income, even tho' the making up this Competency to them should not leave as much to himself as the lowest of them gets, or should even deprive him of his all."

Sure a serious Answer to such Arguments would be greatly misapplied. How can a Trifle, little, if at all, above the Twentieth Part of one Year's Rent of a Man's House, be deemed equal to his All, unless a Person could be supposed wild enough to take a House at twenty times the yearly Rent of his whole Estate? But, says the *Alarm*, suppose 8 *per Cent.* should answer the present Demand, it must take 16 *per Cent.* of the Rents payable, if Half the Houses in Town should become waste? No doubt; but why suppose half the Town laid waste? Does not this Method of arguing shew, that no Scheme can be more equitable than a discretionary Power lodged with the Representatives of all the Societies in Town, when that Power is limited by the Legislature not to exceed a Sum certain? Or, can it be supposed, that the Inhabitants, subjected to the Tax themselves, would lay on a Sum to their own as well as the utter undoing of their innocent Neighbours? Whereas, on the other hand, if so much *per Cent.* was laid on, that might answer at present, and yet be insufficient, supposing the Necessities of the Poor the same, and the Inhabitants of the Town abundantly able to supply them, but as many Houses lying waste, as would render the Quota, not exceeding so much *per Cent.* somewhat less than the necessary Demand; whence it seems to follow, that the Method proposed bids fairest to answer the different Events; and, whatever a warm Fancy may suggest, can hardly ever be abused, while under the Direction of those who are themselves subjected to the Burden.

Lastly, The *Alarm* sets forth, That a great *Fracas* is made in the Proposals about naming Stent-Masters, their making Proportions and Reports, Methods of comptrolling them, naming a Collector, which is called loading the Tax with a Place of 50*l.* besides the Charges which must attend the making a Valuation, which he treats as idle, as the Valuation is taken up for other Purposes; and adds, that the College of Justice has the same Check on the Town's Stent, with regard to their making up the Valuation by which the Annuity is levied; and concludes, that this may afford Perquisites to some Folks, and will encrease the Weight of the Tax; and that is all these Clauses can serve for. But sure the College of Justice has nothing to do with the Annuity; from that they are exempted. The Valuation, it is true, is annually taken up, in order to ascertain each Landlord's Quota of the Land-Tax payable to his Majesty; but if one Person was Proprietor of Twenty Houses, I am informed his Valuation is in one Article, but each Possession must be distinguished where every Tenant or Occupier of a House is to pay separately; and the Precautions with regard to the College of Justice became absolutely necessary, because they were never formerly subjected as Possessors of Houses (which many of them are without having Property in Town) to any Tax, either by way of Annuity or Poor's Money. The Stent-Masters perform their Office *gratis*, and no doubt the same Persons will take up the Valuation, both with regard to the Interests of Landlords and Tenants; so that there can never happen, as the *Alarm* supposes, two different and contradictory Valuations at one and the same time; and it is equally incongruous to suppose, that the ingrossing these necessary Clauses were intended to afford a Perquisite to *some Folks*; but who these are, or what the Perquisite can be, is left to the Author to explain.

To call the Collector's Salary for himself, Clerk's Books, &c. loading the Tax with a Place of 50*l.* looks indeed a little odd: The common Rate of a Factor's Fee on a Land Estate, equal to this annual Rate, comes to about 90*l.* a Year, altho' the same may be levied perhaps but from a few Tenants; but this Tax must be drawn out of the Hands of many Hundreds, or rather Thousands; so that the Gratification is nowise equal to the Trouble, and could not possibly be undertaken by any Person able to find the Caution required, was it not to be levied by a Person employed already in some such Way.

Thus far ~~here~~ I run over all the Objections, and cannot help observing, that the Author of the *Alarm*, after his dreadful Apprehensions of its falling so heavily upon the Inhabitants, concludes, that he would not have taken the Trouble of writing his Letter upon that Subject to his Friend, for all his Share of the Tax for the first Ten Years; which is a pretty fair Concession, that he himself does not consider it as a very grievous Burden, altho' his *Alarm* hath conveyed a very different Idea to some Persons, not of equal Capacity with that Gentleman, to judge in Matters of this Kind.

I am not sensible that any thing material has been overlooked, and do fairly admit that I know of no former Burden upon Houses for the Maintenance of the Poor, except the 2 *per Cent.* mentioned by the Gentleman: But as the present Tax is intended to be equal, and without Exemption of Magistrates, Stent-Masters, Professors of the University, Ministers of the Gospel; or others, it is but reasonable, that all former Taxations on Houses, for Maintenance of the Poor, should cease and determine, from the Commencement of this Act, if the Community shall be so happy as obtain it. And whatever may be the present Sentiments of some, I persuade myself, that your using your Interest for the Establishment of so just and equal a Scheme, will not only procure the Approbation of many of the best and worthiest of your fellow Citizens, but Posterity will bless the Memory of those who first projected, or had a hand in carrying into Execution, so excellent a Project, in usefully employing the numerous Poor of this Metropolis. I have the Honour to be,

S I R,

Edinburgh, Feb. 11th, 1749.

Yours, &c.

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